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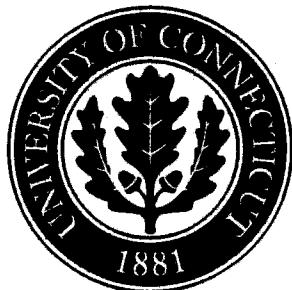
## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to identify the factors found to contribute to the success of academically gifted African American male students within the college and university setting. Southern State University, a historically black university and Texas State University, a traditionally white institution, served as the settings from which the two participants were selected. A combination of observations, interviews, and written documents were selected to complete each of the case study investigations. Phenomenology was selected as the theoretical framework, and grounded theory was employed in the data analysis process. Six categories were subsequently identified. These categories include: relationship with faculty, peer relationships, family influence and support, factors influencing college selection, self-perception, and institutional environment. Differences were found between the two schools. The research-oriented approach to education maintained by Texas State University supported the student's academic giftedness but did not thoroughly support his academic giftedness outside of the academic settings. Conversely, the liberal arts approach to education maintained by Southern State University supported the participant's academic giftedness within and outside of the institutional setting. Implications for higher education institutions, both from an academic affairs and students affairs perspective, are discussed. (Contains 67 references.) (CR)

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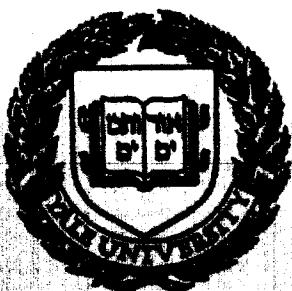
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**Gifted African American Male  
College Students:  
A Phenomenological Study**

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# **Gifted African American Male College Students: A Phenomenological Study**

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San Antonio, Texas

September 2001  
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# **THE NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON THE GIFTED AND TALENTED**

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# **Gifted African American Male College Students: A Phenomenological Study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

One academically gifted African American male undergraduate attending an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and one academically gifted African American male undergraduate attending a Traditionally White Institution (TWI) were studied to learn more about their perceptions of how the relationships with their respective institutions led to the cultivation of their academic giftedness. Study findings uncovered six emergent categories in combination with diverse institutional missions as the contributors to these students' perceptions.

# **Gifted African American Male College Students: A Phenomenological Study**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The status of African American males within the halls of academe has been viewed through a number of contextual lenses (e.g., achievement, recruitment, retention, and socialization). Despite the focus on this population in each of these respective areas, rarely has our gaze been cast upon those who have been identified as "academically gifted." A cursory review of the scholarly literature in this area reveals a severe gap in the research highlighting this cohort.

Existing data focusing on academically gifted students has primarily been collected within the K-12 setting, with an overarching emphasis on the issues impacting non-minority students. This trend, according to Torrance (1977), has led to an underutilization of the talents made available by the culturally different—an alarming prospect, especially when we consider the future educational status of African Americans in our country. The experiences of our high achieving minority students, which often go unnoticed due to the universal assumption that gifted students are "naturally endowed" with the abilities to traverse the higher education terrain, are at many times dismal. According to the U.S. Department of Education, among African American students scoring at the highest levels on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (those with a combined verbal and math score of 1,400 or above), more than 18% leave school because of academic problems (USDE, 1993). Thus, our lack of commitment to addressing the needs of the academically gifted African American male cannot go unabated.

The purpose of this investigation was to identify the factors found to contribute to the success of academically gifted African American male students within the college and university setting. Two different institutional contexts, an Historically Black College or University and a Traditionally White Institution, served as the settings from which the study participants were selected. Two cases, both academically gifted African American males, were identified on the respective campuses. The research question for this project was: What are the perceptions of an academically gifted African American male undergraduate student attending an Historically Black College or University and what are the perceptions of an academically gifted African American male undergraduate attending a Traditionally White Institution concerning his relationship with the institution in the cultivation of his academic giftedness?

Qualitative research methods were employed in this study. A combination of observations, interviews, and written documents were collected to complete each of the case study investigations. Phenomenology was selected as the theoretical framework, and grounded theory was employed in the data analysis process. Six categories were subsequently identified. These categories include: Relationship with faculty, peer relationships, family influence and support, factors influencing college selection, self-perception, and institutional environment. Each category was addressed in turn, with a summary discussion of the implications for higher education institutions, both from an academic affairs and students affairs perspective.

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U.S. Department of Education. (1993). *National excellence: A case for developing America's talent.* Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	v
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	vii
<b>CHAPTER 1: Introduction</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER 2: Method</b>	3
Theoretical Tradition	3
Participants	4
Data Collection	5
Trustworthiness	5
Data Analysis	6
<b>CHAPTER 3: Findings</b>	7
Relationships With Faculty	7
Peer Relationships	8
Family Influence and Support	8
Factors Influencing College Selection	9
Self-Perception	10
Institutional Environment	11
<b>CHAPTER 4: Discussion and Implications</b>	13
Relationships With Faculty	13
Peer Relationships	14
Family Influence and Support	15
Factors Influencing College Selection	16
Self-Perception	16
Institutional Environment	18
<b>CHAPTER 5: Conclusion</b>	21
<b>References</b>	23

# **Gifted African American Male College Students: A Phenomenological Study**

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

Giftedness is a concept that has fascinated, perplexed, and even infuriated many. According to Colangelo and Davis (1991),

On the one hand, we applaud the individual who has risen from a humble background. We value and admire his or her talent and drive. On the other hand, as a nation we have a strong commitment to egalitarianism, as reflected in that mighty phrase 'All men are created equal.' (p. 3)

Yet, people have always been interested in men and women who have displayed superior ability (Renzulli, 1986). As early as 2200 B.C. the Chinese had developed an elaborate system of competitive examinations to select outstanding persons for government positions (DuBois, 1970), and down through the ages almost every culture has had a special fascination with its most able citizens.

Although the interest in giftedness has continued, there has been little interest in identifying giftedness among individuals of minority groups. Black students, particularly males, are three times as likely as White students to be in a class for the educable mentally retarded, but only half as likely to be in a class for the gifted or talented, according to a College Board study (cited in Irvine, 1990). In addition, Kunjufu (1991) reported high levels of underachievement among African American male students; while this group comprised a mere 8.5% of the total U.S. school population, they were found to represent 36% of the U.S. special education population.

Baldwin (1991) stated that ethnic and cultural issues are of crucial importance as we consider appropriate educational programming for gifted students. In a review of the literature on gifted African Americans, Ford (1994) found that only 2% of the articles and scholarly publications focused attention on gifted minority learners in general, and even fewer focused specifically on African American students (the largest U.S. minority population).

The limited amount of literature targeting the gifted African American student has primarily focused on elementary and secondary issues. Indeed, most gifted programming initiatives are primarily implemented at these levels (Fries-Britt, 1998). Yet, there has not been concomitant interest in the gifted collegiate student; therefore, research and scholarship addressing this population have been relatively non-existent.

A growing body of literature has focused on the psychosocial issues African American students experience during their matriculation at post-secondary institutions, with a particular emphasis on the situations (academic and non-academic) these students encounter relative to the type of institutions they attend. For example, in a study of the factors influencing student persistence in a national sample of college students, Astin

(1975), controlling for family social status, academic ability, and educational aspirations, found that Black students were significantly less likely to drop out of college if they were enrolled in a predominantly Black institution. Similarly, Pascarella, Smart, and Stoecker (1987) found that Black students performed better academically at predominantly Black institutions even when controlling for institutional selectivity, financial resources, size, and sponsorship.

Allen and Wallace (1988) investigated the experiences of African American students on both predominantly White and historically Black college campuses. The focus of their study was on student outcomes, including student academic achievement, student social integration into campus life, and student occupational aspirations. Findings suggested that student academic performance was affected by the quality of life these students experienced at their respective institutions. Additionally, the levels of academic completion, university's rules/procedures/resources, relationships maintained with faculty, and established friend-support networks were also contributing factors to their success.

Still other literature (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Bonner & Murry, 1999; Fleming, 1984; Garibaldi, 1991; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Hughes, 1987; Lomotey, 1990; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Ross 1998) lends credence to the argument that African American students attending historically Black institutions experience a greater degree of person-environment congruence. This sense of "fit" stems from a close association between the student's espoused "worldview" and the institutions' espoused mission and goals.

Although the studies previously cited represent an array of achievement levels among the African American post-secondary student population, it is unclear as to what the particular institutional factors are that contribute to the success of these students. According to Ford, Webb, and Sandidge (1994), because the issues confronting school-age gifted students may carry over into post-secondary school experiences, it is important that we pay particular attention to these issues at the collegiate level.

The assumption that gifted students are capable of traversing the academic terrain unassisted, solely due to their academic prowess, is a faulty proposition at best (Colangelo & Davis, 1991; Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999; Ford & Harris, 1993; Ford & Harris, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1997; Hébert, 1998). This situation is further complicated if the gifted student happens to be African American and male. Research has revealed that this population of students brings an entirely different set of developmental needs to the post-secondary table (Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1997; Fries-Britt, 1998).

This study attempts to disaggregate the literature focusing on gifted minority students to uncover the unique issues experienced by one particular group within this cohort, namely, the academically gifted African American male. The question framing this study is, "What happens to the gifted African American male student once he enrolls in college?" More specifically, this study attempts to illuminate the experiences of two academically gifted African American male undergraduate students, one attending an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and the other a Traditionally White Institution (TWI), concerning their relationship with these institutions in the cultivation of their academic giftedness.

## CHAPTER 2: Method

Qualitative research methods were used to collect data for this study, including (a) in-depth, open-ended interviews, (b) direct observation, and (c) written documents. Patton (1990) stated that data from interviews consist of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge concerning a particular phenomenon. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), one of the main characteristics of qualitative research is its focus on the intensive study of specific instances, that is, cases of a phenomenon.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (p. 8). Qualitative researchers also seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. Therefore, in conjunction with personal interviews, observations and written documents are employed to detail descriptions of people's activities, behaviors, actions, and the full range of interpersonal interactions and organizational processes that are part of the observable human experience.

### Theoretical Tradition

Phenomenology is the theoretical orientation that informed this study. First used by the German philosopher Edmund H. Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology "is the 'science of science' since it alone investigates that which all other sciences simply take for granted (or ignore), the very essence of their own objects" (Husserl, 1965, p. 23).

Phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question: "What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?" The phenomenon being experienced may be an emotion-loneliness, jealousy, or anger. The phenomenon may be a relationship, a marriage, or a job. The phenomenon may be a program, an organization, or a culture. (Patton, 1990, p. 69)

In this investigation, I used a phenomenological case study approach to understand the experiences of two academically gifted African American male undergraduate students. The phenomenon under investigation was each student's relationship with his respective institution. I wanted to gain an understanding of how each student's experience with the institution had subsequently led to the cultivation of his academic giftedness. The essence of the students' experiences aided in answering the posed research questions. According to Patton (1990), these essences are the core meaning mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced.

Case studies were employed to provide thick description and detail of each student's experiences. According to Yin (1994), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. For example, questions such as "What did you think when\_\_\_\_\_?" would not only elicit a response highlighting feelings and emotions, but a description of the context within which the situation occurred. The case study approach provided me with the opportunity to view each student's experiences with the phenomenon from his individual perspective within his natural environment.

## Participants

The two institutions as well as participants selected by the researcher for this study were purposefully chosen based on a number of predetermined selection criteria, including high school grade point average (GPA), college grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, and recommendations by collegiate officials who were knowledgeable of both students' academic performance. Although selection criteria were taken as aggregate measures of these students' academic abilities, standardized test scores were not found to serve as valid predictors (Fleming & Garcia, 1998; Hilliard, 1976). The scores reported by both students fell below national norms for individuals typically identified as academically gifted. Yet, this did not serve as a deterrent, as many gifted minority learners, particularly African American learners, perform poorly on traditional measures of intelligence (Baldwin, 1980; Eby, 1983; Frasier, 1989; Hilliard, 1976; Renzulli, 1981; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986).

The sites selected were Texas State University (TSU), a TWI, and Southern State University (SSU), an HBCU. These two sites were chosen based on similarity of institutional size, highest degrees granted, demographic location, and student-faculty ratio. Both enrolled approximately 8,000 students (Boyer, 1994), granted doctoral degrees, and were located in small non-urban centers; with an average student-faculty ratio of about 20:1. The two institutions were noted for drawing their student populations primarily from the South.

I purposefully selected these students based on their class standing (junior or senior), as well as their past and current academic success. I sought case study participants who were identified during their K-12 experience as academically gifted through standardized testing procedures [Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT)]. In this study it is recognized that giftedness is multidimensional. Tests assessing creativity, musical ability, and psychomotor skills are additional measures used to identify students for gifted and talented programs. However, for the purposes of this study I was interested in academic giftedness (i.e., schoolhouse giftedness or test-taking giftedness; Renzulli, 1986).

Participants were targeted in the 3.00 to 4.00 grade point average range with a particular emphasis on high academic achievement, defined as grade point averages in the range of 3.50 to 4.00. Information was gathered from a number of sources such as: K-12 scholastic records, recommendations by university instructors, and recommendations by other actors knowledgeable about the students' academic achievement. This approach, in combination with the criterion used to select the case study participants, incorporated one of the primary components of the federal Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act used for the identification of gifted students; namely, the gifted student excels in specific academic fields (USDE, 1993).

Participants at the junior or senior level were solicited due to their prolonged exposure to the institution and for the rich detail they could provide regarding their undergraduate experiences. In addition, data were sought from friends, instructors, and administrators with whom the two primary case study participants interacted on their respective campuses.

One academically gifted African American male from TSU and another from SSU was selected to engage in the study. The first participant, Trey (a pseudonym), was a 21 year old senior, chemistry major at TSU. Born in a small town in East Texas, he graduated from public high school in 1993 from a class of approximately 100 students. The total

population of Trey's high school was 500 students, grades 9 through 12. His high school grade point average was 3.70 on a 4.00 scale and his combined SAT score was 880. He was involved in a number of secondary extra-curricular activities: football, basketball, track, and National Honor Society. Trey continued to excel academically in the collegiate setting maintaining a 3.40 GPA and receiving a number of college academic scholarships. He was also named to the University Dean's List three individual semesters. Trey was a student affiliate of the American Chemical Society and an active member in an Historically African American Greek letter organization.

The second participant, selected from SSU, was Stephen (a pseudonym), a 21 year old junior, chemistry major. He was born in a small town in South Louisiana, where he graduated from public high school in 1993 from a class of approximately 61 students. The total population of Stephen's high school was 200 students, grades 9 through 12. Stephen's high school grade point average was 3.14 on a 4.0 scale and his combined ACT score was 18. Like Trey, he was involved in a number of extra-curricular activities: Beta club, marching band, and the varsity basketball team. Stephen also continued to excel academically, maintaining a 3.50 GPA. His collegiate accomplishments included: Academic Merit Scholarship, Ford Motor Scholarship, National Collegiate Science Award, Who's Who Among American College Students, All-American Scholar Award, National Dean's List, and a scholarship recognizing him as the highest ranking chemistry major.

Stephen was named to the Southern State University Honor Roll three academic semesters and to the University President's List three academic semesters. He was also involved in a number of key campus organizations, serving as treasurer of the Golden Key National Honor Society and vice-president for the SSU chapter of the National Association of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers.

## Data Collection

To assure the quality of collected data, I employed a number of procedures—each centered on questions designed to make provisions for the establishment of trustworthiness (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The steps employed in this process are included in the following section.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness asks the question, "To what extent can we place confidence in the outcome of the study" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 145)? According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), measures of trustworthiness are applied to persuade audiences that findings are worth paying attention to, and worth taking account of. Additionally, trustworthiness is grounded in questions of truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Each of these components was treated in turn.

The criterion of truth-value was addressed through the use of prolonged engagement. This required that I be involved with the site sufficiently long enough to detect and take account of distortions that might otherwise have crept into the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I spent 144 hours over the course of an academic semester at each of the two campuses. Applicability of findings was addressed through the concept of transferability. Transferability is the similarity or "fit" between two contexts. The two case studies are presented in a format that requires the reader to decide what elements are applicable to certain contexts.

Consistency of findings was addressed through the use of an audit trail. An audit trail provides documentation of the research process followed in completing a case study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Neutrality was addressed through a number of measures including member checks, peer debriefing, and persistent engagement. Member checks are discussions with participants of the data collected during an investigation, to clarify and attain additional data. These were employed on a weekly basis to ensure clarity in the data and to avoid conveying erroneous observational and interview information.

Debriefing sessions were conducted on a weekly and bi-weekly basis for purposes of providing valuable feedback concerning the direction of the study and to offer insight and suggestions on possible study design enhancements. Persistent engagement, assisted in identifying those characteristics and elements in the situation that were most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and allowed me to focus on them in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants, through weekly reflective journaling, maintained persistent engagement.

## Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim yielding 227 pages of transcripts. All information was analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding methods to uncover salient emergent categories and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The constant comparative method was also implemented to serve as an on-going means of comparing data to and against other data to provide additional insights on research findings (Merriam, 1990).

The observational and interview data were detailed and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) were provided to fully identify the participants, setting, actors, language, and nonverbal behaviors observed at each site. A "thick description" does more than record what a person is doing. In thick descriptions, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (Denzin, 1989).

## CHAPTER 3: Findings

Critical themes in each student's college experience that influenced the cultivation of his academic giftedness were identified. They include: (a) relationships with faculty, (b) peer relationships, (c) family influence and support, (d) factors influencing college selection, (e) self-perception, and (f) institutional environment.

### Relationships With Faculty

In discussing his relationships with faculty, Trey revealed the level at which he maintained his in-classroom and out-of-classroom interactions. Although he viewed the faculty to be supportive of his academic endeavors, he perceived there to be no relationship extending beyond the parameters of the classroom setting. When describing one particular relationship with a professor (White male) he viewed as instrumental in assisting him secure an academic scholarship, Trey stated:

He was instrumental and though we established a relationship it was not a leisure or pleasure type of relationship . . . it was always academic but then again there was the barrier between just a regular student and someone he cares about and that barrier was broken.

Trey made additional inferences concerning his relationship with faculty. In his interactions with another professor (White male) within the chemistry department, Trey asserted:

I can say things that some other people cannot say . . . we have that type of relationship and he won't get mad, as he would probably get with somebody else that he didn't know. So that is the type of relationship I have had with my professors.

In discussing his relationships with faculty, Stephen revealed that he did not have a significant number of interactions with his instructors, but perceived he could call on them in times of need. After observing Stephen's in-class and out-of-classroom contact with faculty, this particular statement caused me to question his response. I believe Stephen provided an open and honest response to the question posed to him regarding the significance of his relationship with faculty, but I questioned the level of support he perceived these liaisons to provide. My trepidation became manifest due to the numerous interactions I witnessed between Stephen and his professors, especially Teacher 2 (African American male; research advisor and mentor) and Administrator 2 (African American female; faculty member and department chair) who had both previously served as Stephen's instructors.

Stephen commented in the interview:

If I had problems outside the classroom, I could go to Administrator 2 or any of the professors. They really instilled the confidence within me.

When discussing how the faculty provided valuable recommendations that assisted him in securing summer internships, Stephen replied:

. . . their recommendations accommodated my personal will power.

Stephen made a number of comments about his instructors and the respect and admiration he maintained for them. Many of his comments were not recorded in the interview data, but occurred during our informal exchanges. Therefore, I viewed Stephen's relationships with faculty to be substantially more significant than what his previous statement implied.

## **Peer Relationships**

Trey spoke to the importance of peer relationships and the necessity of establishing and maintaining friendships. In his standardized open-ended interview response, Trey posited that although friends were an important part of his life, he did not maintain an extensive circle of individuals he consulted or interacted with on a daily basis—other than his roommate, who happened to be his younger brother. In responding to the interview question that asked if he perceived campus social relationships to be important, Trey stated:

Yeah, they are, uh, but I don't just make it the biggest most important thing like other people do. I don't rate it way up at the top as far as my list of priorities . . .

He made several comments regarding the close relationship he maintained with his brother, and how he served as his confidant. Trey also spoke about the relationship he maintained with his laboratory partner (Friend 1), another African American male science major—as well as members of his fraternity. I ascertained that this insular group served as Trey's circle of friends, a group comprised solely of African American males.

The importance of peer relationships was also reflected in Stephen's experience at SSU. Stephen reported that he had a number of friends on the campus. He reported that his contacts with peers stemmed primarily from his academic pursuits; namely, research projects or classroom assignments. When questioned about the relative importance of campus social relationships, Stephen posited:

When it comes time for studying, it's always good to study in groups or something like that. If I didn't know something, I could always call one of my classmates, you know, other students . . . They're real important . . .

Stephen also maintained a relationship with his cousin who attended SSU. He stated that he occasionally stopped by her apartment to "shoot the breeze." Additionally, Stephen was encouraged to attain his educational goals by interacting with individuals who were supportive of him and who were also interested in promoting their own academic success. Although not solely reflecting an all male composition, Stephen's peer group, like Trey's, was strictly comprised of African Americans.

## **Family Influence and Support**

Familial influence and support was a category articulated in each of the standardized open-ended interviews. Trey talked extensively about his relationship with his family and their influence on his academic achievement. He attributed the majority of his academic success to his mother; she exerted an overwhelming influence on many of his decisions relating to his collegiate experience and plans. Trey made the following comment concerning his mother's influence:

I use the same patterns that she started me out with when I first got in school—as far as kindergarten; I use the same ones up in college. I haven't changed. I was actually asked a question about that earlier last semester and they asked me how do I make a GPA or why is it that I am so studious and uh . . . it all goes back to my mother.

Trey also made reference to the role his mother played in his college application process. In responding to the question that asked about his reasons for selecting TSU, Trey discussed the role his mother played in his decision to defer acceptance to his first institutional choice, another TWI located in the state, Central Texas University:

I always discuss everything with my parents, especially my mother and when I came back I told her about the Central Texas campus . . . all the tour guides had to say and one thing that really struck her was the class size. I told her how many and I think there were like five hundred in some classes and she really didn't agree with that . . . she was more interested in me getting like a smaller . . . being in smaller classes so I could have more one-on-one type of relationships with my professors . . . so basically she influenced me to come here because this was my second choice.

Trey shared with me the skills and values his mother imparted to him during his formative years, information that continued to prove valuable in promoting his academic success. According to Trey, his mother's guidance shaped his perception of how the institution supported his giftedness, through means such as small classes, one-on-one relationships with faculty, and recognition for academic achievement.

Stephen remarked that he too consulted his family on various matters of importance; they (family) served as a major source of support. He commented that he was trying to decrease his level of dependence on them and to ultimately make more independent decisions. Nevertheless, he maintained a close bond with his father, mother, and sister. When asked about the frequency of his consultations with his family, Stephen stated:

I would say at least, 70%. I would like to try and become more independent.

Most of the references Stephen made regarding his family members were aimed at the support they provided him during the college selection process. Both of Stephen's parents were college graduates, alumni of SSU, and were very influential in his decision to not only attend college, but to also attend their Alma Mater.

The support Stephen received from his family supplied him with the confidence to pursue his academic and professional goals. By instilling the confidence in their son to achieve, Stephen's perception of the institution supporting his giftedness came to fruition in the form of assistantships, scholarships, awards, and recognition as the top student within his department. During the interview Stephen stated:

My parents paved the way for me and instilled in me the confidence that I could succeed.

## **Factors Influencing College Selection**

Trey cited the smaller class sizes and one-on-one type of relationships he could establish with his professors as the major reasons for choosing to attend TSU. His

rationale for selecting the institution ties in directly with the previous section, family influence and support, in which Trey revealed the influence his mother had on his collegiate decision-making process. Trey spoke candidly about his decision during the interview.

Since I have been going here, I'm really glad I did because I am more able to understand the subject at hand as opposed to Central Texas University. I had classmates . . . go there and they are way behind because they don't have any type of really reaction [sic] . . . I mean interaction with their professors, they are just basically numbers and I didn't think that would be good for me or for my understanding of certain things.

In addressing the research question, I concentrated on the factors, which influenced Trey's selection of TSU and how these factors have molded his perception of the institution's support of his giftedness. I again found that Trey's perception of the accessibility and support of faculty to be one of the primary determining factors in his selection process. The relationships Trey established with faculty are fundamentally the same relationships he establishes with the institution; therefore Trey's giftedness is essentially supported through committed and meaningful engagements with faculty.

Stephen's parents are alumni of SSU and were proponents of their son attending the institution. When responding to the question, which asked Stephen of the role his family played in the college selection process, he stated:

They really left it up to me, but uh, since both of my parents are alumni of Southern, they kind of said, "Oh, you gotta go to Southern State" or something like that. And I was always hearing how, you know, Southern State is "number one."

Stephen also stated that his decision to attend Southern State was an easy choice for him. He identified an additional factor impacting his decision—his desire to attend an institution geographically removed from his home community. Stephen intimated that a move away from South Louisiana would broaden his cultural and educational experience. Although he cited the school's location as a primary selection factor, the pre-eminent decision to attend SSU was based on the positive experiences his parents reported regarding their undergraduate years spent at the institution.

The message conveyed to Stephen via his parents was that SSU would support his giftedness by providing an environment conducive to learning—an environment that would provide him with the confidence to achieve his goals while simultaneously providing him with a rewarding undergraduate experience. From the numerous conversations I had with Stephen throughout the course of this study, I perceived he found just what he and his parents predicted. As Stephen reported at the conclusion of his interview:

I would just like to say that my academic experience at Southern State University has been enriching.

## Self -Perception

Many inferences were made concerning self-perception. Self-perceptions ranged from "excellent" to "I do okay" with an extensive number of variations mentioned in between. Trey talked forthrightly and shared that he perceived himself to be an open and caring individual. He used terms such as *kind*, *gentle*, *softhearted*, *neat*, and *compassionate* in describing himself. Trey reported in the interview:

When people come to me and need help, I never turn my nose up or walk away. I know if I was in that same position I uh, I know I would like help, so I try to put my feet in other people's shoes as far as that is concerned . . . .

Trey spoke briefly about his academic self-perceptions. I expected him to spend an inordinate amount of time discussing his academic prowess, but academics constituted only a minor portion of his response. He maintained that he did not wear his academic talent on his sleeve, but preferred to be more subtle and unassuming regarding his scholastic achievements. Even when prompted to discuss his academic giftedness in a subsequent question, Trey revealed that he did not like to concentrate on his abilities. He reported that he believed all individuals possessed gifts and talents in some area of demonstrable intelligence. Additionally, he stated that he perceived himself to be an independent thinker who was unwilling to compromise his academic success for social gratification.

There's no type of influence from other people. If I feel like I want to do it, I do it, if I don't, I just don't. A lot of people have gotten upset because of that.

In reviewing Stephen's interview, I made an interesting observation. One of the questions in the standardized open-ended interview asked the participants to describe how they would respond if someone referred to them as gifted. A typical rejoinder to this question was, "I'm not gifted, I just work hard" or "I would question their definition of the term, 'gifted.'" Similar responses were noted across both cases. Stephen, however, unlike Trey, did respond and use the term gifted in his self-description. Stephen reported:

I think, uh, you could have many interpretations of that word-gifted. Uh, yes, I think you could call me gifted.

Stephen's confidence and drive appeared to develop due to his parents' as well as the school's belief in his abilities. This in turn bolstered his self-perception, ultimately leading to the institution supporting his giftedness. The assertion I made concerning the support TSU was willing to provide the student who excelled academically was also exemplified at SSU. Yet, a significant difference does exist between the two cases; namely, the willingness of the HBCU to not only assist the high achieving student, but also the student of average abilities (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Ross, 1998). Stephen perceived SSU to be supportive of his academic success, but he also perceived that the institution would be equally supportive of him if he experienced periods of academic discord.

## **Institutional Environment**

The participants provided a range of responses related to their perceptions of the institutional environment. Trey responded to a question that asked if he perceived the institutional environment to be competitive or collaborative. He commented:

You got to be ten times as smart as anybody else, especially somebody White because there is always going to be some type of favoritism or some type of leeway being given to them or some type of break. So, you really, really got to prove yourself. I had to prove myself. It shouldn't come down to that, but yet in still [sic] it happened to me.

It is important to note Trey's comments regarding his perception of the institutional environment; he perceived the environment to be one of competition and inequality.

The information provided concerning Stephen's perception of the institutional environment at SSU varied. At a minimum, the institutional environment was viewed as collaborative by the other academically gifted African American males, faculty, and administrators interviewed. Some perceived there to be a healthy mix of collaboration and competition on the HBCU campus, but the overall perception was that a prevailing campus ethos engendering cooperation and teamwork existed. Stephen cited collaboration to be an important component to succeed in his area of study. He reported:

When it comes time for studying, it's always good to, like study in groups or something like that. If I didn't know something, I could always, you know, call one of my classmates, you know, other students.

I found Stephen's comments regarding the advice he would give an extremely high-achieving African American male thinking of attending SSU after high school graduation to be indicative of his overall view of the institutional environment. Stephen responded:

I would encourage him. I would definitely encourage him.

Stephen's statement not only emphasized the respect he maintained for SSU, but his level of comfort in recommending the institution to other prospective students. The statements provided in this category served to bring the standardized open-ended interview to a close. Stephen perceived the institutional environment to be collaborative and viewed his collaborative relationships with his peers and instructors to serve as important contributors to his academic achievement. When asked about the one thing he would change regarding his academic experience at SSU, Stephen replied:

I guess. I don't know. I'm kind of content right now.

## CHAPTER 4: Discussion and Implications

In addition to generating data highlighting a population that has been historically overlooked in the scholarly literature, this study also serves to provide a deeper understanding of this group's unique post-secondary experiences. This study provides several implications for current theory and practice for both academic affairs and student affairs practitioners desiring to meet the needs of the academically gifted African American male undergraduate.

### Relationships With Faculty

This study revealed that the establishment of relationships between faculty and students is an important element in the academic mix—perhaps the single most important element contributing to the student's successful matriculation. Faculty are an extension of the institution, one could even advance the notion that faculty are the institution (Duderstadt, 2001). Thus, Trey's perception of the support he received from faculty was a direct indication of the support he received from the institution. The data indicate that Trey perceived the University to meet his expectations as far as in-class needs were concerned, but beyond his in-class encounters relationships with faculty appeared to be relatively non-existent.

In Trey's case, the question was, "could the University provide better support of his giftedness through increased student-faculty relationships that extended beyond the classroom environment?" Although Trey was academically successful, meaningful relationships with faculty members within and outside of his department could have only served to enhance his collegiate experience and the cultivation of his academic gifts and talents.

While Trey found his relationships with faculty to be limited in scope, in contrast Stephen reported the relationships he maintained with faculty to be supportive with an overarching sense of *esprit de corps*. I ascertained that Stephen's numerous contacts with his professors were such commonplace experiences that attaching a definition or attributing a qualitative or quantitative assessment to these relationships proved to be problematic.

Stephen's relationship with Teacher 2 and the strong ties he maintained with Administrator 2 were significant liaisons that extended beyond the classroom setting. The relationships Stephen appeared to develop with his professors seemed indicative of the relationships promoted between students and faculty in most Black college mission statements (Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Ross, 1998), statements emphasizing a concern for the whole student, typically identified in the liberal arts approach to education. Relationships between students and faculty at HBCUs are identified with such descriptors as enduring, multi-faceted, and mutually supportive (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Davis, 1986; Fleming, 1984). Roebuck and Murty (1993) assert that the interactions between Black professors and students are many-sided, sustained, and personal; therefore, these interactions promote a strong orientation toward success.

For academic and student affairs professionals, the initiation of events, practices, or programs aimed at creating liaisons between faculty and students is a necessary piece of the student learning and development puzzle. The current status of the student affairs profession in particular is guided by documents such as the Student Learning Imperative

(SLI), that promote dialogue on ways that student affairs professionals can intentionally create conditions to enhance student learning, growth, and development (Schroeder, 1996).

A concerted effort to link academic and student affairs divisions together on the college campus, by way of establishing relationships between students and faculty, will serve not only as an outward display of the institution's acknowledgement of the importance of these relationships, but also as a means of recognizing the student's developmental needs. These efforts impart a very poignant message; the institution does not view the student as operating in some bifurcated existence—part academic and part social—but where these two areas merge.

## **Peer Relationships**

The symbiotic relationships established between Trey and his peers assisted him in a multitude of ways, from studying for important examinations to discontinuing a fraternity pledge process that may have ultimately led to his academic demise. The relationships Trey established shed light on the many experiences and individuals within the institutional setting that would contribute to his success and eventual growth and maturity. These relationships served as the conduits to provide Trey with the needed information to determine how the institution would support his giftedness, which was invariably identified as high scholastic achievement.

Stephen's commentary regarding his peer relationships also contributed valuable information to assist in addressing the guiding research question; namely, how did Stephen's relationships with his peers influence his perception of the institution's support of his giftedness? This question was treated in his pointed comments concerning educational achievement through mutually beneficial relationships with peers. Peer relationships provided Stephen with the compass to determine the proper direction to travel to reach his ultimate destination of academic success. Stephen's academic accomplishments led the institution to support his giftedness by providing him with valuable recommendations for awards, internships, and scholarships.

Stephen was aware of the benefits he received from the relationships he maintained with his peers. These relationships reinforced his academic achievement and ultimately led to the institution supporting his giftedness. According to Harvey and Williams (1989), Black students on Black campuses are commonly assisted in feeling good about themselves within the institutional context due to favorable interpersonal relationships with their peers.

The development and maintenance of initiatives aimed at fostering meaningful relationships among students is important when considering student attraction, satisfaction, and stability within the post-secondary setting. Peer relationships may expose students to a social network of other achievement-oriented peers, thereby generating and reinforcing higher aspirations and goals. Both students acknowledged the benefits, whether academic or social, they procured from the relationships they maintained with peers. Campus based engagements such as living and learning communities or student-learning cohorts could be implemented to provide students with opportunities to establish those necessary bonds to feel a sense of connection not only with the institution, but also with others engaged in learning within the institution.

The student affairs professionals' stance on promoting peer-peer interactions through various programmatic initiatives and campus-based engagements should engender an ethos of proactive involvement. Student affairs professionals are often viewed as the

stepchild in academe—a supporting role often cast in the shadows of their academic affairs counterparts. Yet, this cohort possesses an unclaimed and unrealized dominance in their access and influence on student learning and development—after all, students spend the majority of their time outside of the classroom. What group would be better suited to lead the charge in creating linkages between students and faculty to promote meaningful relationships that foster student success. In essence, this group should take a proactive approach in assisting students with the many developmental issues such as establishing meaningful relationships, establishing identity, mattering, fitting-in (Astin, 1975; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Schlossberg, 1985), and a host of other related topics typically associated with the college student development process.

## **Family Influence and Support**

The involvement of Trey's family, particularly his mother, is not atypical of the gifted student's experience (see Kulieke & Kubilius, 1989). Trey provided a vivid account of the psychosocial and emotional support he often received from his family. Telephone calls to his mother, seeking her counsel and guidance, were cited as occurring as often as three times a week during times of perceived need (i.e., emotional support).

Surprisingly, in one instance, Trey's strong familial ties were viewed as an obstacle in his pathway to academic development. This was reflected in a comment advanced by one of Trey's instructors. According to the instructor, Trey's decision to decline a summer internship offer at a prestigious national laboratory was made based on his mother's counsel. The instructor perceived her trepidation to be initiated by the distance of the laboratory from the home and family unit. Also, the lack of a viable contact (e.g., family or friend) in close proximity to the laboratory's isolated locale influenced her decision—subsequently influencing Trey's choice to decline the offer. Trey's rationale for turning down the internship offer was of limited importance to the instructor, but of utmost importance to Trey and his mother. According to Piirto (1994), a student is likely to follow a path of development that parents approve of and in which at least one parent has an interest.

The support Stephen received from his family supplied him with the confidence to pursue his academic and professional goals. From his initial selection of SSU as an undergraduate institution, to his status as the highest-ranking student within the chemistry department, the support and advice Stephen received from his family led to his academic achievement; this in turn buttressed the institution's support of his giftedness.

This category provided important implications for integrating parents into the student's collegiate experience. Orientation officials at the university-wide and departmental level should promote initiatives that include family members and parents in the admissions and retention process. Bridging the knowledge and expertise of the student affairs professional in the area of campus-based orientation programming with the acumen and intuition of the academic affairs professional in the area of department/domain specific orientation programming could serve to meet the varied developmental needs of all students. Bridging should be enacted with the family serving as the supportive scaffolding, primarily through their participation in programming initiatives. This assertion is affirmed by the research (Wilson & Constantine, 1999; Wilson-Sadberry, 1991) that places the family squarely in the equation involving the college student socialization process.

## Factors Influencing College Selection

Trey's perception of the accessibility and support of faculty was an important factor in his institutional selection process. In a study conducted by Davis (1986), he found that relations with faculty are positively related to university GPA, considerations of dropping out, and feeling a part of campus life. Similarly, these relationships impacted Trey's perception of how the institution supported his giftedness.

Both case study participants were influenced by their families in selecting their respective institutions. A *prima facia* interpretation of the rationale behind each family's promotion of these two different institutional types may appear discrepant across cases, but a close examination reveals similar motivating factors—support and achievement.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy factors impacting Trey's institutional selection process was campus size. His perception of the impact of institutional size on his academic success was directly related to the support he perceived that the institution would provide for his giftedness. Although the literature has been inconsistent in the area of institutional size and its effect on educational attainment, Astin and Panos (1969) and Anderson (1984), controlling for student pre-college characteristics and other institutional traits, found that attending a large institution had a negative influence on persistence and degree attainment.

Stephen's rationale for selecting SSU was due primarily to his parents' past affiliation with the institution. His perception of his parents' admiration for their Alma Mater influenced him to take a closer look at the school's curricular offerings. Stephen also spoke of his parents' accomplishments; both were recipients of advanced degrees and were thriving in their selected careers. Thus, Stephen's perceptions were influenced by his parents' accomplishments and their recommendation of the institution as a viable collegiate option. The message conveyed to Stephen was that the institution would support his giftedness by providing him with an environment conducive to learning, an environment that would instill in him the confidence to achieve his educational goals while simultaneously providing him with a rewarding undergraduate experience.

Programming to meet the needs of a diverse student body should be the goal of all student affairs divisions. Yet, beyond cursory attempts at programming, these divisions must embrace a mission and promote a campus climate conducive to inclusiveness for the entire student population. According to Manning and Boatwright (1991), "Student affairs departments shape, manage, and influence significant aspects of the university environment. As such, their impact on the process of multiculturalism is particularly important to all participants in the institution" (p. 374). The student affairs professional through the implementation of administrative models, policies, programs, and special campus centers (Gordon & Bonner, 1998) can strengthen diversity on campus while simultaneously enhancing the academic and social experiences of diverse student populations.

## Self-Perception

Both case study participants provided interesting commentary regarding their views on self-perception—commentary elucidating their own views of "self" and the views they perceived others held of them. Additionally, the two institutional contexts provided unique backdrops for discussion.

A high regard for self, tempered by an overarching sense of humility, was the common personality thread that linked the two participants together. Yet, it was primarily

the institutional context that appeared to uncover differences in the manner in which their views were articulated. According to Fleming (1984), the sense of affirmation and support that Black students receive in Black institutions of higher education is quite apparent when compared to the seeming lack of affirmation and support that they frequently experience at predominantly White institutions. This notion appeared to become manifest through the dialogue provided in the interview data eliciting both respondents' perceptions of their academic giftedness. While Trey tempered his response and would not readily accept the title "gifted" as a personal descriptor, Stephen immediately embraced the moniker as a viable indicator of his personal accomplishments.

The literature provides a novel depiction of African American students and their notions regarding self-perception, a depiction that perhaps explains the forthrightness in Stephen's response and the reluctance in Trey's reply regarding his designation as gifted (Bonner, 2000; Fries-Britt, 1998; Hébert, 1998). According to Hughes and Demo (1989), two major dimensions define self-perception—self-esteem and personal efficacy. While many studies in the early 1950s reported African Americans to possess low levels of self-esteem, Hughes and Demo's study found contrasting results—African Americans did not appear to possess lower levels of self-esteem than their non-minority cohorts, in several accounts, they actually possessed higher levels. What this population tended to exhibit were lower levels of personal efficacy, the second component in the self-perception link. The argument the authors advanced regarding these differences implied that:

- Personal self-esteem is most strongly influenced by microsocial relations with family, friends, and community, while personal efficacy is generated through experiences in social structures embedded in macrosocial systems of social inequality. We conclude that Black self-esteem is insulated from systems of racial inequality, while personal efficacy is not, and suggest that this explains why Black Americans have relatively high self-esteem but low personal efficacy. (p. 132)

Stephen's sense of confidence in his abilities and his positive view of himself as a gifted student was developed in both a homogenous microsocial and macrosocial environment. Each academic and non-academic engagement was experienced in a setting with individuals who essentially shared Stephen's ways of thinking, knowing, and experiencing the world—to that end, he did not experience the negative views of self initiated by negative macrosocial encounters. Thus, Stephen's self-perception did not appear to be adversely impacted.

Unlike Stephen, Trey operated in an institutional setting that led to the division of self-perception into the two dimensions reported in the study. Although Trey displayed confidence in his abilities and a high level of self-esteem—he was very reluctant to adhere to being described as gifted. Again, if we apply the findings from Hughes and Demo's (1989) study, we find that Trey's microsocial group provided the needed supports to buffer his self-esteem against negative external forces. Involvement in his macrosocial group, which consisted of many non-minority administrators, instructors, and peers, did not seem to provide this buffer, and this in turn appeared to become manifest in Trey's expressions of timidity and apprehension when the term "gifted" was used to describe his academic personae.

The educator, whether academic or student affairs, must recognize the importance of creating environments that promote an environment of inclusion and a level of comfort to satisfy and sustain all learners. Again, part of the educational experience, beyond learning, should promote growth and development.

Student affairs administrators can forge boundaries to address issues impacting student self-perception. This section provided key insight regarding the necessity of creating macrosocial environments that are conducive and supportive of the African American student. Microsocial cohorts such as Historically Black Greek Organizations and special campus interest groups such as the Black Student Union are key societies that ground Black students and help them to fully integrate into White campus culture. In addition, we must provide those needed macrosocial outlets that promote involvement and a genuine sense of *esprit de corps* among all campus constituents (Gordon & Bonner, 1998).

## **Institutional Environment**

In relating his perception of the institutional environment to the research question, Trey intimated that he perceived the university to be non-supportive of his academic giftedness. Whether his beliefs were real or imagined, they ostensibly constituted his general perception. According to Hughes (1987), Black students perceive predominantly White university environments to be intellectually oriented, achievement oriented, independence oriented, and competition oriented. She also asserted that such orientations are least likely to produce the best environment for Black students, for whom socially oriented climates are crucial for learning and growth.

If universities are to truly support African American students' gifts and talents, they must come to terms with the perceptions these students construct regarding their respective institutional environments. According to Fleming (1984), predominantly White colleges have not succeeded in combating Black students' social isolation, perceptions of classroom biases, and perceptions of hostile interpersonal climates. Thus, we see Trey's perceptions are not new, but the school's interventions to address these matters should be. The role of the student affairs division at TWIs should include the embodiment and promotion of a campus-wide multicultural agenda. A culturally competent cadre of student affairs professionals should be poised and ready to address emergent issues posed by a diverse campus clientele. Ebbers and Henry (cited in Rentz, 1994) advanced a number of questions culturally competent student affairs administrators should embody in their practice, "What is cultural competence? What level is desirable? How is it attained? How is it measured? Should this training become an integral part of the pre-service program experience? Should it be included as an intensive segment of on-the-job in-service?" (p. 694).

In contrast to Trey's experience, Stephen's perception of a collaborative institutional environment served to positively influence his view of the institutional climate and subsequently led to his feelings of contentment. Because of the relationships he maintained with his peers and instructors, Stephen perceived the institution to be supportive of his academic giftedness by providing him with needed academic assistance and guidance to successfully matriculate at SSU. Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (1996) asserted that if TWIs followed the lead of HBCUs in creating a welcoming institutional environment for the African American student, they could possibly contribute to the creation of a more supportive and validating climate for Black students when they are a minority culture on campus.

According to Pascarella et al. (1996), there may be much to learn from those historically Black colleges that are able to develop a supportive institutional climate for students without sacrificing academic standards or intellectual impact. However, student affairs divisions at HBCUs should also promote activities and campus-based experiences that are inclusive of their ever-changing student populations. Notwithstanding the numerous successes reported by HBCUs in addressing the academic and social needs of

the Black student population, rising concerns have been leveled against these institutions for their lack of initiatives and programs aimed at meeting the needs of gay and lesbian, international, non-minority, and women matriculants. According to Sims (1994), "HBCUs should create climates which foster optimal performance by all members" (p. 16).

## CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

The descriptive cases of the experiences of two gifted African American male undergraduate college students presented in this study revealed a number of significant differences. Differences were noted regarding the relationships they maintained with their respective institutions in the cultivation of their academic giftedness. The research-oriented approach to education maintained by Texas State University supported Trey's academic giftedness within the institutional setting, but did not thoroughly support his academic giftedness outside of the academic setting. Conversely, the liberal arts approach to education maintained by Southern State University supported Stephen's academic giftedness within and outside of the institutional setting. In essence, each of the identified categories led back to the overarching issue regarding the institution's approach to education.

Texas State University, although a Doctoral I institution with a commitment to the liberal arts, approached education from a research-oriented focus. Trey's interactions with faculty were overwhelmingly uni-dimensional, primarily centering on academic issues. He appeared to develop no true sense of rapport with faculty beyond the classroom setting. The concern for the student as a "whole" being, part academic and part social, the mantra we extol in higher education, seemed to be lacking in several aspects of this institutional context.

Southern State University, designated as a Master's I institution, with a strong penchant for the liberal arts, approached education from a standpoint of meeting the academic and non-academic needs of all students within the academy, while simultaneously respecting their individual levels of ability—"meet the students where they are," is the implicit philosophy advanced by the institution. Stephen's relationship with the institution proved to be supportive of his academic giftedness within and outside of the institutional setting. The primary means of supporting Stephen's giftedness was through the institution's approach towards education. In terms of the implications for student affairs divisions, this study provides valuable information to not only address the needs of the academically gifted African American male undergraduate, but to also address the needs of a wider minority student populace.

The following statements summarizes the findings from this phenomenological study:

1. Scholarly research must be generated that focuses on the unique needs presented by the academically gifted African American male collegian.
2. Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Traditionally White Institutions must identify policies, programs, and procedures to meet the needs of the academically gifted African American male.
3. Relationships between academically gifted African American males and faculty members are important factors in the successful matriculation of these collegians.
4. Relationships among academically gifted African American males and their peers are important factors in these students' overall collegiate experience, both from an academic and social perspective.

5. Family influence and support for academically gifted African American males are key components in their pre- and post-collegiate experiences.
6. Factors influencing the collegiate choices made by academically gifted African American males are based on a number of key issues, issues that are often based on affect and perception.
7. Self-perception influences the manner in which the academically gifted African American male interacts with administration, faculty, and peers within the academic environment.
8. Institutional environments impact the academically gifted African American male through the promotion of campus cultures engendering collaboration, competition, or some semblance of both processes.
9. Academic and student affairs divisions must work in concert to promote the success of academically gifted African American males.
10. The mission of the Historically Black College and University and the Traditionally White Institution must promote a concern for the "whole student."

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